

REMAIN AND WITNESS

By James Fred Barber

I was invited by the president of the standing committee to write a response to the slide show presented at the May 16, 2002 meeting of the Executive Counsel. This paper attempts to present some of the reasons for our diocese to remain within the Episcopal Church. I believe one option that was not mentioned in the slide show presentation was “remain and witness”.

1. A Conservative Pole

The model for most protestant churches in their proclamation of the gospel is to search for the most perfect expression of the gospel, and to reject all others. This leads to a model of the church that has historically been expressed as the “rule or way of the saints” You search for truth, and you reject those who disagree with your understanding of that truth. From its beginnings the Anglican Church adapted another model. In the Elizabethan compromise, Queen Elizabeth I aimed for a broad church that would include as many of her subjects as possible. On the one side were the Presbyterian puritans, and on the other side were the high church Anglicans. Gospel truth was not something to be pinpointed, but something that was found in the church as a whole. Agreement on all subjects was not required.

It was not a perfect system, but it worked in the Anglican family of Churches. While other church families split and divided, the Anglican Church remained united. Even with the breakup of the British Empire, the flexible model of the broad church that did not agree on everything, but was united in their commitment to the gospel, helped the Anglican Church to remain united.

Over the past several hundred years the church has disagreed about church government, the power of Primatial oversight, slavery, segregation, and women’s ordination (to name only a few). In the tradition of the Anglican Church we have not forced a solution, but we have lived with ambiguity until we reached some agreement or accommodation. The broad church model worked.

Today we are faced with some new and vexing problems. Should practicing gay persons who intend to remain in that lifestyle be ordained as bishops? Should the church change its understanding of marriage and allow same sex marriages? And the issue of the validity of women as priests is still questioned in some parts of the church (including our diocese).

The diocese of Fort Worth takes a conservative and traditional stand on each of the questions mentioned in the preceding paragraph. It affirms that gay people who continue a gay lifestyle are not fit candidates for the Episcopacy (or the priesthood). It affirms that marriage is a sacrament where God blesses the partnership of a man and a woman. It affirms that the priesthood and episcopacy is reserved for males.

In the current debate in our diocese, other bishops and authorities in the larger Episcopal Church are quoted making extremely liberal statements on these subjects. These quotes were part of the May 16th slide show. No doubt those quotes are accurate. There is a left wing in our church that sees these subjects not so much as theological issues, but as human rights issues. These voices echo the current political arguments that no one should be denied any office because of their gender or sexual orientation. They seem to forget that we are an institution that derives its laws and teachings from God, and not from a political state.

But the fact is, that these extreme examples do not represent the mind or the thought of the broader Episcopal Church. The vast majority of the people of the Episcopal Church have their thoughts and beliefs somewhere between the Diocese of Fort Worth, and the Diocese of New Hampshire. Looking to the past, Elizabeth I knew that most of her people were neither Puritans nor Anglo-Catholic high churchmen. She also knew that it was important to try and maintain both extreme poles, so that the vast middle could learn, choose, and flourish.

Our diocese seems to be heading for a separation from the Episcopal Church. We want to remove ourselves as part of the conservative pole of the Episcopal Church. It seems to me that this is an unwise move. If we pull out seeking to be a church that wants “pure truth” in these issues, then we will cause an imbalance in the Episcopal Church that we leave. The liberal wing will become more powerful, and it will be increasingly difficult for moderates and conservatives to remain in the Episcopal Church. The reader may say “so what”, or “it serves them right”. I would remind you that these people are your brothers and sisters in Christ. You have a responsibility toward them and toward their spiritual health. Sometimes we are called to an uncomfortable witness. Sometimes we are called to be a “burr in the saddle” making the larger church uncomfortable by our presence and our witness. I believe we have a responsibility to ask ourselves, why has God put us in this uncomfortable position with the national church. Is it his will for us to break off and run away to people who it seems we would be more comfortable? Or, is it his will for us to bear the “slings and arrows” and witness to what we see as the gospel truth. It has been my experience that God rarely calls us to be more comfortable, but often calls us to be uncomfortable witnesses.

2. Where are we going?

It seems inviting to leave the Episcopal Church and join a group of churches that seem to share our beliefs. It is true that they do share our beliefs about the ordination of homosexual persons who continue to follow the gay lifestyle, and the necessity of marriage being between a man and a woman. But there are other things that are necessary if people are to live together over the longer term.

We are part of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, and our form of Anglican government is rather unique. We began in rebellion, and many of the ideas of

individualism remain strong. For example, as the Bishop of the Diocese of Dallas pointed out when he withdrew his request for alternate Episcopal oversight, there is really no such thing in the American Church. We do not have an Archbishop whose power arches over those of diocesan bishops. Rather we have a presiding bishop whose limited power comes from being the presiding officer of the house of bishops. Our PB has no power to order. The National Church has power to request, but rarely to insist. I think we are assuming that any new alliance would be like our old one. Would that be the case? If we submit to an Archbishop, would we not have to understand that we have put ourselves under another form of the Anglican Church? In the past years we have ignored the financial asking of the National Church. We have given the Network less than what they requested. We have simply turned a cold shoulder to the presiding bishop. We have withdrawn from the province. Our American polity gives us the power to do these things. Will the polity of some other Anglican body with which we ally give us such freedom? Personally, I doubt it.

We should realize that our form of Anglican government is greatly influenced by our social history. We are a nation where states have individual power, and we created a church where individual dioceses have great power. If, for example, we ally ourselves with the Archbishop of Nigeria, then we should understand that we will be allying ourselves with a church that has been greatly influenced by a tribal understanding of society. The chief and his clan have great power over other clans and other people. I think it especially unlikely that we would enjoy the same freedom as a diocese under a church centered in Africa. Let me say that this is not to say that our form of Anglican Church government is good, and theirs is bad. It is simply to say that they are different, and we ought to be aware of those differences before we make new alliances.

3. Precedence

If we withdraw from the Episcopal Church, we will not only be taking an action, we will be setting precedent. In the American church experience one of the most common ways to solve a problem is for a church body to split. If a church comes to a difference of opinion about a matter of doctrine, a matter of church government, or a matter of worship, it is a common practice in the American Church experience for a congregation or a whole denomination to split and go their separate ways. This has not been the Anglican way in America. We have remained united though we had great disagreements about worship, theology, and social causes.

I would argue, that when a church solves a problem by dividing, then it sets a precedent that comes back to haunt them. If one past problem was effectively solved by schism, then why not use this to solve the problem that seems so important for us today? We divide today from the Episcopal Church to solve our disagreements over sexuality. In ten years other problems that we have put on the back burner will come back to the fore. None of the proposed future alliances involve agreement on the ordination of women. There is much disagreement about the use of the 1979 book of common prayer. All the questions about sexuality have not been addressed. How will we face these problems in

our new Anglican setting? Will these problems, when they are faced, block a union? Will such disagreements lead to the eventual demise of our new union when groups exercise the set precedent of division and withdrawal to solve a disagreement.

4. How comfortable will we be in our new Anglican setting?

We are uncomfortable in the Episcopal Church, it is too liberal. But as I proposed, perhaps God is calling us to be uncomfortable and witness where we are.

How comfortable will we be in our new setting? Bishop Duncan advocates a church centered in Africa, probably Nigeria, and probably under the leadership of the Archbishop Akinola. He is an evangelical; we are largely Anglo-Catholics. He works with what most people would consider a dictator; we enjoy the blessings of a republic. We believe in the separation of religion and State; that is not a concept that is generally understood in Nigeria. He is a man used to exercising power over his bishops, we are a church that is not used to having our bishops ordered around. His ideas concerning sexuality and the right of gay people go far beyond the stand we want to take regarding gay marriage and ordination.

Are we really going to be comfortable in this relationship that is advocated by Bishop Duncan? Is this an Anglican marriage that is going to work? Will we find ourselves in the midst of another separation in ten years? Would we be able to separate, or would we be trapped in a bad marriage?

This past year, after hearing Bishop Duncan at Camp Curcis, I decided that I would remain a priest in the Episcopal Church. I am not happy with the liberal bent that the church has taken over the last years, but I believe I can be a small piece of leaven; I believe I can be a witness for the more traditional side. I believe that other traditional dioceses like Texas (and probably Dallas) will make the choice that I have made. There will be a conservative wing in the Episcopal Church. Many Episcopalians will regard us as a “burr in the saddle”; we will see ourselves more positively as “leaven in the dough”. I believe the diocese of Fort Worth should consider remaining a part of the Episcopal Church and adding her voice to the Traditional dioceses who will also remain.

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